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No Proof Linking 9/11 To Hussein, Officials Say

By Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and national security advisor Condoleezza Rice said Tuesday that they had no evidence that Saddam Hussein had a direct hand in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

The two officials' rejection of a direct connection between Hussein and the attacks comes on the heels of a Washington Post poll showing that nearly 70% of respondents believed the ex-Iraqi leader was probably involved in the plot.

The Bush administration has asserted that Hussein's government had links to Al Qaeda, the terrorist network led by Osama bin Laden that masterminded the Sept. 11 attacks. And in various public statements over the last year or so, administration officials have suggested close links.

Vice President Dick Cheney, for example, said Sunday that success in stabilizing and democratizing Iraq would strike a major blow at the "the geographic base of the terrorists who have had us under assault for many years, but most especially on 9/11."

But asked at a Pentagon news conference Tuesday about the widespread belief that Hussein was personally involved in the attacks, Rumsfeld said, "I've not seen any indication that would lead me to believe that I could say that."

"We know he was giving \$25,000 a family for anyone who would go out and kill innocent men, women and children," Rumsfeld said, referring to payments Hussein made to relatives of Palestinian suicide bombers. "And we know of various other activities. But on that specific one, no, not to my knowledge."

Meanwhile, in an interview on ABC's "Nightline," Rice said that one of the reasons President Bush went to war against Hussein was because the Iraqi leader posed a threat in "a region from which the 9/11 threat emerged."

But asked about the poll, she said, "We have never claimed that Saddam Hussein had either direction or control of 9/11."

"What we have said," she added, "is that this is someone who supported terrorists, helped to train them, but most importantly that this is someone who, with his animus toward the United States, with his penchant for and capability to gain weapons of mass destruction, and his obvious willingness to use them, was a threat in this region."

On NBC's "Meet the Press," Cheney was asked whether he was surprised that more than two-thirds of Americans in the poll expressed a belief that Iraq was behind the attacks.

"No, I think it's not surprising that people make that connection," he replied.